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## A century of service: celebrating the role of deaconesses in the church

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# Deaconesses in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1908-2008

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## Introduction

In the early years of the twentieth century, a group of Irish Presbyterian clergymen from Belfast became increasingly convinced that more and more people were no longer attending church. In their attempts to stem what they feared was a rising tide of secularism and irreligion, they contemplated what was, for the time, a radical solution. They decided to train single women to work full time in inner-city congregations and assist the minister with a range of outreach activities, congregational support work and basic social welfare provision. This idea formed the basis of what eventually became the deaconess movement in the Irish Presbyterian Church. In 1908 the Deaconess Home and Girls' Hostel opened its doors and four young women were accepted for training. Over the next 100 years, more than 100 women were 'commissioned' as deaconesses in the Irish Presbyterian Church.

Throughout the twentieth century, these women have laboured largely in obscurity. The biographies of their founders, the histories of the congregations in which they worked and the surveys of the denomination to which they dedicated their working lives have rarely done more than simply mention their efforts. From the start they were overshadowed by the more glamorous work of the foreign missionaries of the Women's Missionary Association and its in-house magazine, *Woman's Work*. Yet the story of the women who decided that home was to be their mission field deserves to be told.

According to the historian Martha Vicinus, the formation of deaconess organizations in evangelical denominations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based on 'a paradox of power and marginality'.<sup>1</sup> While these institutions provided women with professional training, gave them officially sanctioned roles within the Church and allowed them to exercise leadership within certain areas of influence, at the same time they were largely run by men, the nature of the work being done was deeply traditional and the position of deaconess offered no challenge to the general exclusion of women from positions of authority in the wider church. This was certainly the case for the deaconess movement in the Irish Presbyterian Church. Throughout the twentieth century becoming a deaconess provided Irish Presbyterian women with

one of the few official opportunities they had to exercise their spiritual calling while at the same time engaging them in what at times appeared to be little more than glorified visiting. While historians, therefore, often suggest that the deaconess movements have done little to expand women's participation in church leadership in the late twentieth century, the attitudes of the women themselves must be taken into account. For those who served as deaconesses in the Irish Presbyterian Church, a life of service was no halfway house or second-best option. It was what God had called them to do.

The story of the Irish Presbyterian deaconess movement plays itself out in three distinct phases. From 1903-43, the deaconess movement was a division of the Social Services Committee and struggled desperately with financial insecurity and denominational apathy. From 1944-70 deaconesses were in the care of the Women's Home Mission. During this time, greater organizational stability and financial security allowed the group to take on more candidates and expand into new areas, such as church extension and social welfare provision. From 1971-2008 deaconesses were the responsibility of the Presbyterian Women's Association. Increasingly liberal attitudes towards women's work, and the decision to allow the ordination of women in 1973, threatened to make them obsolete. However, in the 1990s they found new relevance as part of a trend towards team-based congregational ministry.

## Historical Context

The term 'deaconess' is derived from 'diakonos', the Greek word for 'servant' and was first used in connection with the early Christian church in the third century. In common parlance 'diakonos' was used to refer to someone who waited on tables. Within the first century Church, it referred to someone with a distinctive Christian ministry.<sup>2</sup> There has been much scholarly debate surrounding women and this role. Textual and visual evidence would suggest that women did function as early 'deacons' and that this involved them in the practical and pastoral management of their respective congregations.<sup>3</sup> It is also clear that by 533 the office (or 'position') of deaconess had been abolished. Professional female activity within the church would now be

conducted largely from within the convent cloister, and not the local community.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that Protestant denominations in the Western Church, of both the 'high' and 'evangelical' variety, sought to revive this office in their attempt to reach out to the urban poor. Beginning in England and Germany in the 1830s, by the early 1900s there were many 'sisterhoods' or 'orders' of deaconesses in countries throughout Europe. In Great Britain, the movement had begun initially within the High Church wing of the Church of England, but by the mid- 1900s it had spread to the Low Church, Church of Scotland and parts of English Nonconformity.<sup>4</sup> The Rev. William Pennefather, an Anglican evangelical, founded the Mildmay Deaconess Institute in 1860. In 1887 the Rev. Archibald Charteris founded a deaconess order in the Church of Scotland and in 1890 Wesleyan Methodists established the Wesley Deaconess Order.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of these organizations was to train single women as full-time church workers, specializing in the areas of district visiting, women and children's work and community nursing. It was not until the early twentieth century that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland made similar efforts.<sup>6</sup>



## Origins of the Irish Deaconess Movement

The creation of a deaconess movement within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was a result of many of the same concerns which had motivated the founders of similar movements in England and Scotland. In the early years of the twentieth century a number of mainly Belfast based ministers began to air their concerns about the spiritual state of the urban working class and the growing number of Presbyterians who, upon moving to the city, no longer attended church. These ministers, several of



whom were members of the influential Home Mission Committee of the General Assembly (GA), called, in 1903, for the appointment of a sub-committee to investigate the work of the church in industrial areas and how it could be improved. Their recommendation was approved and the Committee on the Work of the Church in



Industrial Areas (CWCIC) was constituted with 42 members: 19 clergy and 23 laymen. At the GA meeting in 1904, it made six of its own recommendations, one of which was to provide ministers of urban congregations with a trained support staff who could assist them in carrying out their duties. This included the recommendation 'that the agency of fully trained women be introduced.'<sup>7</sup>

The idea of training women for full-time church work was pursued and developed in successive years. Local presbyteries were consulted, money was donated, premises investigated and women expressed an interest, but nothing substantial was initiated until the Convener of the CWCIC, the Rev. D.A. Taylor, organized a conference on the issue in Belfast in October 1907. This was an important event in the history of the Irish deaconess movement. Rev. A. Miller, Deaconess Lamond and Miss Perry, representatives from the Church of Scotland's deaconess institute and hospital, were invited to speak about their experiences of deaconess work. Local Presbyterians spoke about their reasons for endorsing trained women workers. On the back of this, a public meeting was held and a committee of ladies was appointed to work with the CWCIC (now the Social Services Committee (SSC)) to establish a similar movement within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. These women were drawn from the Presbyterian Women's Union, a group with whom the CWCIC had already established contact and whose purpose was to act as a focal point for women's work within the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of the next few months, the physical and structural form of the

organization was determined. An admissions policy and training curriculum were drawn up.<sup>9</sup> In January 1908, the first classes for prospective deaconesses were held in the Kinghan Mission Hall.<sup>10</sup> The committee signed a five-year lease on two houses at 5-7 Botanic Avenue that provided accommodation for Presbyterian working girls as well as deaconesses in training.<sup>11</sup> The Deaconess House and Girls Hostel was formally opened on 2 June 1908<sup>12</sup> with Miss Katherine Rae, a deaconess recruited from the Church of Scotland, as Lady Superintendent.<sup>13</sup> A Deaconess House committee was formed and it soon began to accept candidates. Miss Stevenson (First Portadown), Miss Barclay (Ulsterville), Miss Watt (Townsend Street) and Miss Miller were all accepted for training in October 1908.<sup>14</sup>

Further organizational developments then took place. In order to provide for the practical side of their training, an area around College Square was secured for deaconesses to conduct district visiting. Arrangements were made with the Deaconess Hospital in Edinburgh to provide hospital training, and the colour (dark green) and style of the deaconess uniform and badge were decided. Efforts were made to advertize both the girls' hostel and the deaconess programme among the wider church through circulars in the press and addresses to synods and presbyteries. However, by September 1909 concerns were already being raised about inadequate finances and various solutions were being proposed. In 1910, in an effort to secure a more regular source of income, the decision was taken to create a 'Social Service and Deaconess Guild' with varying rates of subscription. With a formal constitution and an executive 'council' drawn from its general membership, the Guild was to be responsible for the daily running of the Deaconess House and Girls' Hostel and be answerable to the SSC.<sup>15</sup>

## Guild Management and Operation

According to its first constitution, the Deaconess Guild was composed of the members of the SSC, the Lady Superintendent and deaconesses, and a range of general members whose status depended on the level of their annual contributions. From this group was selected an executive, called the 'Council', which consisted of the Convener of the SSC and 12 other members elected at the Annual Meeting. The Lady



Superintendent was to be in attendance, but did not have the right to vote. Because the formal Guild only met once a year (at the Annual Meeting), it was the Deaconess Guild Council (DGC) that was responsible for the day-to-day running of the Home and Hostel.<sup>16</sup>

At the first meeting of the Deaconess Guild, on 29 June 1911, the first Council was elected with Lady Crawford as President, Lady Anderson and Mrs R.J. McMordie as Vice-Presidents, Mr J.H. McCleery as Treasurer and the Rev. D.A. Taylor as Convener of the SSC. The other members were ministers and laymen from the SSC and women from the PWU who had already been involved in launching the deaconess movement. Over the course of the next 30 years, the size and membership of the Council fluctuated greatly. The original group of 12 soon increased to over 20, as the constitutional requirement for regular retirements was routinely ignored.

Despite the growing size of the Council, it was consistently run by a small group of committed individuals led by the Rev. D.A. Taylor. Taylor (1847-1941) was the son of Sir David Taylor, a Belfast merchant, and had studied at Queen's University, Assembly's College and in Germany. After 19 years at First Comber, he was appointed Secretary of the Presbyterian Orphan Society in 1896, a position he held until his death. Over his 35-year term as Convener of the SSC, he was assisted by the Rev. A.F. Moody (Cliftonville, 1909-40), the Rev. Prof. Robert Corkey (Assembly's College, 1917-66) and the Rev. T.A. Smyth (Great Victoria Street, 1897-1936), the latter being elected to care specifically for the deaconesses in 1927. Other clergy, like the Rev. David Purves (Elmwood, 1889-1923), the Rev. John Pollock (St Enoch's, 1901-30), the Rev. J.M. McIlwrath (Donegall Road, 1896-1920), the Rev. William McCoach (Oldpark, 1902-33) and the Rev. Robert Anderson (Richview, 1920-46), were conspicuous in their support for this work, mainly by virtue of their regular attendance at Guild Council meetings.<sup>17</sup>

The women on the Guild Council were clearly members of Belfast's political and religious elite. Mrs McMordie, for example, was married to an MP and a future lord mayor of Belfast, and eventually became an MP and JP in her own right. A number were the wives of clergymen, like Mrs D.A. Taylor, Mrs David Purves and Mrs Henry

Montgomery. Others seem to have been wealthy members of their respective congregations. However, very little is known about the likes of Miss A. Reid, Miss Davies, Mrs Morrow, Mrs D.K. Mitchell and Mrs Robson, even though they attended meetings with much greater regularity than most of their male colleagues.

The entrance requirements for potential deaconesses were hammered out at a joint meeting of the CWCIC and ladies' committee in November 1907. To gain acceptance as a candidate, applicants had to:

- a. produce a certificate of Presbyterian church membership and satisfactory references from her home minister
- b. pass a medical examination by a doctor appointed by the Council
- c. pursue the course of study stipulated
- d. demonstrate a sufficient degree of prior experience which, if the Council deemed it, could be accepted as an equivalent to training and the candidate be exempt.<sup>18</sup>

Although not explicitly stated, candidates were expected to live in residence and to pay the costs of this training, set in 1907 at £30 per session.<sup>19</sup>

Women were encouraged to apply to the Council in writing, whereupon their applications would be considered and, if deemed suitable, they would be interviewed and approved. By 'suitable' the Council clearly meant well-educated, middle-class women who could, ideally, support themselves. In various publicity drives, Council members referred to 'daughters of the manse, the young women of education and leisure', 'young ladies of private means' and 'ladies of means' as their ideal candidate.<sup>20</sup> Letters of application received in 1926 from obviously poorer women were dismissively referred to as 'scarcely up to the standard of education and experience necessary for such important work' and it was agreed to put a notice into the Press clearly stating the type of candidate they ideally sought.

The application process was by no means a token gesture. The Council took it very



seriously and routinely rejected applications which they considered to be inadequate. Miss Winter, for example, an applicant in 1912, was rejected because her references were not considered strong enough. Miss Hunter, an applicant in 1915, although having attended the classes in 1910-11, did not live in residence or go to Scotland for hospital training. Despite the strong support of her minister, the Council delayed making a decision for several months until her application was eventually withdrawn. In the early 1920s, however, the Council was forced to reject candidates for very different reasons. The lack of money and places meant that both potential candidates and hopeful ministers were turned away. Thus, the Rev. Stewart Dickson of Saintfield, hopeful of obtaining training for a Miss Crosby, was told of 'the difficulties of finding work for deaconesses at present', and was urged to consider training in Scotland.<sup>21</sup> Tensions between the desire to take on new candidates and the possibility of finding them a place was a constant source of frustration for the DGC.

The training programme for Irish deaconesses was, from the outset, an ambitious one. Determined to train their candidates at home, and not in Scotland as originally planned, the CWCIC envisaged a course of study which combined the academic and the practical. The first curriculum, published in 1907, was divided into two sections: 'instruction', in which biblical and theoretical knowledge would be taught; and 'practical training', in which district visiting and hospital training were carried out, alongside classes in basic nursing and domestic economy.<sup>22</sup> How this programme was actually delivered is difficult to determine. It would seem that candidates were expected to be resident in the Deaconess Home and to train for two sessions of 10 months duration. As part of their formal instruction, candidates would take two or three courses per term spread out over three terms, with formal examinations at the end of each one. Conducted by Professors of the Presbyterian Theological College and a number of medical professionals, the lectures concentrated on subjects like 'Lessons on Scripture', 'Christian Doctrine and Church Principles', 'Methods of Parochial Work', 'Domestic Economy and Hygiene' and 'Medical and Surgical Methods'.<sup>23</sup> While arrangements had been put in place to provide candidates with practical opportunities to engage in district visitation, provision of hospital training had turned out to be much more difficult to arrange. Council efforts to gain access to the Ulster and Royal Victoria

Hospitals had been rejected because the proposal was seen to be unworkable. As a result, the Church of Scotland Deaconess Order, which had a thriving hospital in Edinburgh, was approached and an agreement reached whereby, in exchange for a session fee of £25, Irish probationers were given six months training. Because the number of Irish candidates was so small, they would only be sent to Edinburgh one at a time, and in rotation.<sup>24</sup>

Once their training was successfully completed, candidates expected to be assigned to a congregation where they would work alongside the minister and under the authority of the session. However, matching trained women with a congregation who wanted one proved to be one of the Council's most difficult tasks. Establishing reasonable terms and conditions was considered essential for future good relations between deaconess, Guild and congregation. For example, when Susan Watt completed her training in January 1910



and had no immediate prospect of employment, the Council approached a number of clergy regarding a place. Several months later, the Rev. W.G. Strahan (First Newry) and one of his elders had interviewed her and found her suitable. He agreed that her salary be fixed at £50 per annum, that the congregation would pay for her first uniform, that both parties should have three months' notice either side, that she live in rooms approved by the session and that she have one month's holiday per year and one day off per week.<sup>25</sup> Once Watt had agreed these terms, hands were shaken and a date for her ordination was agreed.

The first deaconesses to be ordained in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland were Elizabeth Barclay (14 Nov 1909 to Duncairn), Susan Watt (1 May 1910 to First Newry) and Mary Stevenson (23 Nov 1910 as Town Missionary for the five Presbyterian churches in Ballymena). The services, which attracted a great deal of public attention,



were simple, informal affairs held after the regular Sunday evening service. Elizabeth Barclay's service in Duncairn Church, for example, commenced with a hymn and a reading of scripture which included Paul's commendation of Phoebe as a church worker and his guidelines for appropriate diaconal behaviour. The Rev. D.A. Taylor then addressed the congregation and explained what Barclay's role would be. He confirmed that the congregation had called her, that she had successfully completed her training and then put a series of questions to her. He asked: 'Do you want to be set apart as a deaconess? Do you promise to work for and be subject to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland? Do you promise to fulfill your assigned duties?' After her affirmation, there was a prayer and the Rev. William Park, Duncairn's minister, then



delivered her charge. He stressed that she had a special responsibility to uphold the work to which she had been called because she was the first Irish deaconess to be set apart in this way and that many people were looking to her as an example. However, he also urged her to 'try and take her duties as they came to her, and not to wait for big things to do' and warned her that 'she should not be disheartened in her

work if progress be slow... If in her first year as a deaconess one soul were brought to Christ, then her ministry would not have been wasted.' There was no formal form of words or 'giving of the right hand of fellowship' at this stage; these would be later developments.<sup>26</sup>

One of the distinctive features of Victorian deaconess institutions was the requirement that the women should wear a uniform. Although this attracted criticisms within evangelical circles that deaconesses were a form of 'Protestant nun', supporters argued that it protected the women and enabled them to enter all sorts of 'low' places with complete safety.<sup>27</sup> In the early years, the 'sub-committee on Deaconess costume' agreed upon a dark green uniform with bronze badge and bonnet. Deaconesses were

expected to wear it on all occasions, except Saturdays, holidays or private evening functions. The Council was adamant in its demand for uniformity of dress, but this proved difficult to enforce and may have contributed to the requirement that congregations provide the first uniform. No doubt the poverty of some candidates was a factor. For example, the Council had originally hoped that deaconesses would purchase their own badges, at a cost of 5/-, but they soon reverted to a policy of long-term loan. Unsurprisingly, uniforms remained a sensitive issue. By the 1920s it was clear that the Council had not kept in touch with the latest fashion trends and in a 'full and frank discussion' with deaconesses in 1926, the Council agreed to change the colour of the uniform to brown. It was not until two years later that they finally agreed to allow deaconesses to wear hats, and not bonnets, on official business.<sup>28</sup> Subsequent changes to the deaconess uniform seem to have attracted much less attention. In 1946, as part of the decision to ally practice more closely to that in Scotland, the uniform colour was changed to grey.<sup>29</sup> In the 1980s, it was changed again to royal blue.

On the basis of evidence derived from rather patchy and imperfect sources, there would appear to have been approximately 28 women appointed or 'set apart' as deaconesses between 1919 and 1943. It is impossible to determine the exact number of women either in training or out working on a yearly basis, but it would appear that, on average, there were about five or six deaconesses working in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland at any one time. The peak seems to have been in 1915, when there were 11 deaconesses at work. The average length of a deaconess' ministry was approximately 4-5 years. Of the 24 who were no longer working in 1943, reasons for leaving are known for 16 of them. Four simply 'resigned', three resigned because of ill health, two left to be married and one was unemployed. Six left to take up other positions. Two became nurses, one went into the Belfast police, one became a foreign missionary, one went into the 'business world' and one moved to England to be a deaconess there.

The Rev. William Park's charge to Elizabeth Barclay gives the briefest of hints as to what these newly trained women could expect from their new positions. However,



evidence of how the women themselves felt about their work is frustratingly absent. From early on, deaconesses and their host ministers were required to submit regular reports on the progress of their work to the Council, but these were rarely reprinted in any significant detail. Deaconesses often spoke at annual meetings and at sessions during Assembly week, but the content of their addresses was seldom reported. Some idea of their activities can be gleaned from the reports submitted to the Council by their ministers, although their anonymity and universally positive tone makes them far from impartial or realistic accounts. In 1911, for example, one minister reported that his deaconess' 'wise and winsome labours have given great help to many, and endeared her to the whole congregation.' Another stated that 'her ministry to the sick was such as only a woman with earnest sympathy and effective training could render.' And another reported that 'she is a universal favourite in the homes of the people where she visits' and 'was most assiduous in her attention to the aged and the poor'.<sup>30</sup> The Rev. Thomas Haslett from Ballymena, in reporting on the work of Mary Stevenson in 1913, wrote:

She has been occupied every evening of the week in conducting or assisting in cottage meetings, or in the work of the C[hristian]E[ndeavour] Societies. But her time and strength have been chiefly given to visitation. The statistics of her work for the year in this connection include the paying of 2,300 visits.... In all cases of sickness and death she has been most assiduous in her ministrations, and that not alone in the things which are spiritual, but in other respects as well.<sup>31</sup>

A further report in 1920 indicated the sheer number of Stevenson's commitments:

On Sabbath morning she conducts a class in First Ballymena S.S. On Sabbath afternoon she superintends a large united S.S. During the greater part of the year she carries on a cottage meeting. She acts as president of the local Y.W.C.A., which has extended its usefulness under her influence. She takes a leading part in the working of a C.E. society in two of the congregations. She is active in the work of several girls' auxiliaries. She is unceasing in her visitation of the sick and afflicted, where her visits are greatly appreciated... She is one of the busiest Christian workers in Ballymena, and her kindly spirit, willingness, and zeal make her popular with everyone.<sup>32</sup>

From these brief reports it can be seen that deaconesses were largely employed in visitation, primarily among the poor and the lapsed. They provided comfort to the aged and ill and conducted a vast range of meetings. In one of the only known accounts of a deaconess' own words, Mary Stevenson, while addressing the General Assembly in 1919, said 'that a deaconess must be prepared to take advantage of a thousand opportunities of being helpful – ready to do anything she was asked to do, lightening the burden of some despairing soul. She loved her work, and was happy in it, and she trusted the Presbyterian Church would encourage the deaconess movement.'<sup>33</sup>

Regardless of the rosy picture which these accounts of deaconess work paint, there were many problems with the selection, training and appointment of Irish deaconesses and with the organizational basis of the movement itself. For example, it proved extremely difficult to maintain an Irish-based training programme. With only one or two new candidates accepted every few years, running local classes for them was simply not viable. Therefore, sometime after 1917 the decision was taken to send candidates to Scotland for their complete training.<sup>34</sup> Another problem was the training requirement itself. Many of the applicants already had substantial experience in church work and sought to avoid the training, and indeed, the residence requirement altogether. Some applicants were already highly experienced church workers. One woman had seven years experience working in her local church, another had been a city missionary in Dublin for 20 years, while another had served as a national school teacher before engaging in some colportage work. Still others had been temperance agents and Faith Mission workers. For many of these applicants, the Council was prepared to waive either all or part of the training requirement, much to the frustration of those deaconesses who had served their time. So frequent were the exceptions to the admission rules in 1925, for example, that in 1926 'a deputation of Deaconesses appeared before the committee to urge that in future no ladies be recognized as deaconesses who have not been trained.'<sup>35</sup>

Maintaining a physical presence for the deaconess movement, in the form of the Deaconess Home and Girls' Hostel, caused similar difficulties. Because of the small scale of the Irish movement, there were never enough deaconesses in training to fill



the Home at any given time. Often the Lady Superintendent used beds allocated to deaconesses to accommodate girls from the hostel. In the 1920s, when deaconess training was transferred to Edinburgh, there was even less demand for the space. In 1927, the opening of the War Memorial Hostel, cheap accommodation for working men and women in Belfast, necessitated the closure of the Home and Hostel. The Lady Superintendent at the time, Miss Jane Bell, kept one house on at her own expense, and the DGC paid her £25 pa to maintain a room for the deaconesses. Although she continued this arrangement even after she had moved to a smaller house in Elmwood Avenue, DGC finances eventually got so tight that the room had to be let go.<sup>36</sup> By the 1930s there was no physical space within the Irish Presbyterian Church to which the deaconesses could lay claim.

As the deaconess movement began to expand, it became increasingly clear that it was not being adopted by the majority of congregations. The appointment of deaconesses was largely restricted to urban areas. Of the 30 congregations which employed deaconesses between 1909-37, 21 were in Belfast and one was in each of Dublin, Newry, Lisburn, Newtownards, Larne and Ballymena. While locating deaconesses in urban congregations had been the whole point, the implications of the perception that this was a Belfast-based solution to a Belfast-only problem were severe. The deaconess's perceived niche role and their lack of relevance to the vast majority of Presbyterian congregations contributed to a chronic lack of funds and a constant anxiety within the Council concerning the Guild's financial survival.

From the outset, the Deaconess Guild had a number of expenses: maintaining the Home and Hostel, supplementing the costs of a deaconess' training and deaconesses' salaries. Ideally, the Guild had envisaged that congregations would pay for a deaconess' salary. However, deaconesses were often assigned to work in poorer congregations who could ill afford an extra expense. The Guild, therefore, was forced to rely on other sources of income to 'top up' deaconesses' salaries and to cover the expenses associated with the Home and Hostel. Some of this came from the PCI itself. The General Purposes Fund provided a regular subvention, although over time this decreased from £100 in 1909-26 to £60 in 1927-29 and only £30 in 1930-34, at which

point it was cancelled altogether. This forced the Guild to cobble money together from a number of different sources. As early as 1911, the Home Mission had been persuaded to pay 50 per cent of the deaconess' salary, if the congregation could not afford the full amount. But even this was not enough, and the Guild regularly relied on direct letter-writing campaigns, bazaars and personal contributions to enable them to provide deaconesses with their expected wage.

Such financial insecurity was no doubt the major cause behind the high turnover in deaconesses. In 1911 a deaconess' salary was approximately £50 pa. By 1916 this figure had been increased to £60 and by 1929 the General Assembly agreed that all deaconesses should receive no less than £100 a year. Even by pre-war terms, these were extremely low wages and put enormous pressure on deaconesses to make ends meet. For example, in 1916, six deaconesses memorialized the Council asking for a pay rise. In 1919, three deaconesses resigned because they could not live on their existing wages. The number of women who left to take up employment elsewhere clearly suggests that the money was inadequate. Even with a deaconess' low wages, congregations still found the financial demands difficult to meet. For example, in June 1918 the Council learned that First Larne had fallen into arrears in its payments to its deaconess, Mary McCalmont, and that it had failed to provide her with a uniform.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the next five years the congregation battled with the Council over how McCalmont was to be paid. The Council tried to recruit congregational members who had shown a 'fraternal interest' in their work, to form a committee within the church that would ensure she was paid. However, even though a new salary had been agreed in 1919, in 1923 the Council was still forced to give her occasional one-off payments because her congregation was simply not paying her enough. Congregations constantly sought to place the burden of their deaconess' salary onto other bodies within the church and resisted any measures that would increase their financial commitment. So, for example, in 1932, when the government required that all deaconesses should be expected to contribute to the new unemployment insurance scheme (at a cost of £77.3.11), the Council asked local congregations to absorb the cost. The vast majority either 'failed' to reply, or objected strenuously to the additional expense. Dunmurry Church's committee, for example, offered to pay the extra insurance, but only if the Council increased their basic grant.<sup>38</sup>



The Deaconess Guild itself tried repeatedly to ensure a secure source of income for the deaconesses, and to set salary levels that were in line with the cost of living. In 1912 it set up a pension fund for deaconesses that was bolstered in 1922 with £1,000 from the Musgrave bequest. But the lack of funding reached a crisis point in 1919, when several deaconesses resigned, and the group never really recovered. In response, the Guild attempted to persuade the GA to pay deaconesses like licentiates, to, in essence, recognize deaconesses as 'ministerial assistants'. This was never discussed or passed. It was only when the deaconesses were taken over by the Women's Home Mission in 1943-4 that their financial well-being was reasonably secured.

## Impact on Women's Roles

The impact of the formation of the Deaconess Guild on the status of women in the Irish Presbyterian Church is, in essence, an ambivalent one. While it may have sounded like an official endorsement of formal leadership roles for women, in reality, the movement was underpinned by deeply traditional attitudes towards the position of women in the Church. For example, while the Guild Council may have comprised both male and female members, the ladies had been originally brought on board to assist with the decoration and furnishing of the Home and Hostel. Later on, they were placed into a separate 'House' sub-committee whose role was to oversee the running of the Home and Hostel while the men reserved for themselves the consideration of candidates and the arrangement of study programmes in a 'Council of Studies'. While this distinction eventually broke down, with men and women both sitting on the Council throughout the 1920s and 30s, its presence at the start of the movement reflects the traditional preconceptions that the male organizers had about women's roles in the church.

The picture that the male organizers had in mind of a deaconess was based firmly on traditional conceptions of woman's role and mission. From the outset, Irish deaconesses were intended to have a largely social role. They were expected to be Christian women trained in the skills of 'hospital nursing, household and social

economy, and district visiting'.<sup>39</sup> The Rev. D.A. Taylor outlined this expectation most clearly in his speech to the GA in 1908:

The deaconess will probably occupy rooms in the district where she is employed. Her rooms will be simply furnished, but models of neatness and cheeriness.



Her day's work fills up all her time. She rises early, and soon she is interrupted by messages from one and another needing some little attention, for she will be well known and trusted by all. Her daily round of visits brings cheery words and helpful service of various kinds – cooking a meal, making a poultice, dressing a burn, listening to some tale of sadness. When meetings are to be held, she will give notice of them, and encourage all to attend, and in a thousand ways she will prove herself a servant of the Church – superintending mother's meetings, Sunday school classes, girls' clubs, and night schools and so forth.<sup>40</sup>

Others emphasized the domestic and maternal aspects of her role. Deaconesses were meant to preserve the family unit. They were supposed to 'go into the houses of the poor and help the mother burdened with a large family and scanty means of livelihood to tidy the house and nurse the infants or sick'.<sup>41</sup> They were meant to use their training in domestic science and household economy to enable poor women to run their homes in a more efficient manner. And because they were women, they were believed to have an innate sympathy with the particular troubles facing women and children. Even though they were single and childless, they were expected to demonstrate a natural maternal instinct. According to Taylor, only another woman could truly understand the cares of the overburdened mother struggling to make ends meet, 'for in every good woman's bosom there beats a mother's heart'.<sup>42</sup> For Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland who visited the Deaconess Home in 1910, 'all women's work



in the world' was really just 'carrying out their Divine mission of "mothering" in one sense or another.'<sup>43</sup> It is true that Irish deaconesses were meant to engage the people they encountered with the gospel, and to seek the conversion of souls, but they were not expected to fulfill a public teaching or evangelistic ministry within their congregations. In this respect, then, the Irish Deaconess Order was not an expression of an expanding role for women within the Church. It did not allow them access to church courts or committees, nor did it seek to extend their role to areas traditionally seen to be outside women's sphere of influence.



At the same time, there were clear signs that the deaconess movement was part of a wider move within the church towards more modern approaches to missions, and towards greater leadership roles for women. Firstly, the founders of the Deaconess Order were deeply influenced by the emergence of 'Christian socialism', the idea that social needs had to be met if spiritual conversion was to be gained. Taylor and Purves both spoke publicly, in approving terms, about socialism and the need for a 'gospel social service'.<sup>44</sup> For them, the church could no longer rely on old methods to reach out to the lost.

Industrialization and urbanization had created new problems which required new solutions. These included a greater emphasis on social work amongst the poor and the greater use of trained professionals. Using trained women, therefore, was an essential part of this modern approach to social problems. From the outset, deaconesses were associated with this liberal, reformist and progressive tendency within the Irish Presbyterian Church.

Secondly, although deaconesses largely did the jobs that women had always done in the church, for the first time they were being given proper training and were being paid to do so. This was a significant step. As *The Witness* recognized, 'mere benevolence

and haphazard charity' were no longer adequate means of reaching the lost in this modern era. What was needed were specialists: women who had 'skills and adaptability' not just devotion and piety.<sup>45</sup> For women, they were being given greater access to theological and practical mission training than they had ever had before. The progressive nature of this training was demonstrated by the recruitment of female doctors to deliver the medical part of the curriculum. Dr Marion Andrews and Dr Elizabeth Gould-Bell, two of the earliest women to practice medicine in the north of Ireland, delivered lectures to deaconesses on health, hygiene and basic nursing. Andrews was on staff at the Ulster Hospital and a member of the Eugenics Society. Gould-Bell was an active suffragette and a friend of Emmeline Pankhurst. Both were active in public health and hygiene campaigns in the early twentieth century. Their involvement would suggest that deaconess training was part of a modern, professionalizing movement within the Irish Presbyterian Church.

Thirdly, although deaconesses conducted traditionally female tasks, they were given a formal status and official recognition within the Presbyterian church structure in order to carry them out. Like ministers and ruling elders, deaconesses were 'set apart' to their position in a formal and public ceremony. They wore a uniform, which made them a visible and distinctive presence within their congregations. Although they were not entitled to sit on sessions or committees, they were expected to operate as ministerial assistants and to work under the minister's direction. Indeed, as full time churchworkers, they had a range of leadership responsibilities and duties over which they had sole charge. In this respect, deaconesses were expected to complement and support the work of the minister. It seems logical to assume that this official status could provide a springboard for further demands for even greater leadership roles.

Given the progressive approach which the members of the SSC had taken towards employing women within the Presbyterian church, it was unsurprising that it was from among the same group of ministers that the earliest calls for women to be admitted as ruling elders and as ministers within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland emerged. As early as 1922 it had appointed women to sit on its committee, probably the first standing committee of the General Assembly officially to do so. Its members often



spoke publicly about women 'beginning to take their place in the Church' and that 'the time was coming when the policy of leaving all the work in the hands of the men, if not entirely reversed, would be considerably amended.'<sup>46</sup> These ideas were given greater impetus in the 1920s, as women over 30 had now received the vote (1918), and women's contribution to the war effort had been universally acknowledged. Progressives within Protestant denominations throughout Britain began to discuss the possibility of enhanced roles for women and a number launched campaigns for full ordination. Irish Presbyterianism was no different. By 1922, the Rev. T.A. Smyth had publicly declared his hope that the 'convention', which prohibited deaconesses from taking the pulpit, would soon be challenged.<sup>47</sup> The Rev. J.M. McQuitty hoped the day would soon come when 'they would give deaconesses not a limited ordination, but as full an ordination as they gave to the ministers.'<sup>48</sup>

These men clearly believed that traditional perceptions of the place of women in the church no longer worked in the modern age. So, when in 1919 the Rev. William McDowell (Cavan) introduced a motion in the General Assembly calling for women to be admitted to church courts, it was the SSC which was appointed to investigate.<sup>49</sup> Their report the next year reflected the committee's unanimous support for McDowell's initiative and declared that 'sex as such ought not to be a disqualification for any position in the Church'.<sup>50</sup> Although they were not prepared to endorse female ordination, they did reflect a progressive spirit within the Assembly towards greater roles for women which eventually resulted, in 1926, in women being declared eligible for the eldership and for membership in the courts of the church 'on the same conditions as men'.<sup>51</sup> Several years later, in 1929, two longstanding members of the SSC, the Rev. W.G. Strahan and the Rev. John Macmillan, introduced an overture to the GA that women be eligible for the ministry on the same conditions as men.<sup>52</sup> This was overwhelmingly defeated when it was sent to the Presbyteries. Women were not admitted to the Presbyterian ministry until 1973. For clergymen in the SSC, their support for deaconesses was part of their progressive attitude towards women in the church in general.

Disappointingly, the potential of the Deaconess Guild to seriously alter the way

Presbyterians viewed women's work in their church was fundamentally hindered by a weak organizational structure and a chronic lack of secure financing. Deaconesses consistently resigned because of the poor salary or the opportunity to pursue more stable careers in foreign missions or nursing. Two of the leading personalities in the Guild, the Rev. D.A. Taylor and the Rev. T.A. Smyth, died in 1941 and 1936 respectively, and the work of the committee took a new direction.<sup>53</sup> In a perceptive analysis of the problems facing the Church of Scotland's deaconesses, D.P. Thomson suggested that the concept of deaconesses had 'never really gripped the mind and heart of the Church...that there had been far too much tinkering with rules and regulations' and that by the 1940s 'the work of the Order had tended to lose its distinctive quality'.<sup>54</sup> Such an analysis could easily be applied to the Irish work. By 1943, with only four deaconesses at work and an executive committee which hardly ever met, the Deaconess Guild seemed on the verge of collapse.

## The Women's Home Mission, 1944-1970

The turnaround in the fortunes of the deaconess movement in 1944 is difficult to trace with any accuracy. Sources which detail the prime movers and their motivations simply do not survive. However, it is possible to discern drivers of change emerging in two or three distinct areas in the late 1930s. Firstly, the Deaconess Guild must have been discussing its future management, given the death of the Rev. T.A. Smyth in 1936. Secondly, the Home Mission, under the convenership of the Rev. John Waddell (Fisherwick), was conducting a substantial review of its structures and finances with a view to bringing its urban and rural activities together under one committee. Thirdly, the SSC had been developing an interest in caring for the female prisoners discharged from Armagh Gaol under the leadership of the Rev. Alfred W. Neill (First Armagh).<sup>55</sup>

In 1939, John Waddell presented his proposal to create a new 'Home Mission' to the GA. It included the suggestion to transfer the Deaconess Guild into its care. It was to be managed by a consultative committee who would administer its finances and seek advice from former conveners and lady members.<sup>56</sup> Whose idea was this? What did they hope would happen to the Guild as a result? It is impossible to know. At any rate,



the proposal was adopted the following year, along with the wider Home Mission restructuring. The Deaconess Guild now looked set to become a division of the Home Mission. However, the Rev. John Waddell, having witnessed the successful achievement of his proposals, decided to step down. He was replaced by the Rev. A.W. Neill in 1942. As indicated above, Neill already had an interest in the care of



women and as soon as he took over the convenership of the Home Mission, he initiated a public debate on the future of the deaconess movement. In November 1942 he sponsored a conference which suggested that the biggest obstacle to trained women's work was the finance. While the details are sketchy, it would seem that, in

consultation with his wife, Neill developed the idea to constitute a women's home mission agency that would have a proper constitution and, most importantly, have a secure financial footing. At the same time, it was discovered that, in an early ruling on deaconess work, the General Assembly had already authorized the formation of a body called the 'Women's Home Mission' which had never come into effect. Therefore, when Neill presented his proposal to the General Assembly in 1944, the precedent for a women's home mission agency was already in place and the original Women's Home Mission (WHM) was constituted for the first time.<sup>57</sup> The constitution and by-laws of the new body were accepted by the General Assembly the same year.<sup>58</sup> For the next twenty-five years, deaconesses would be managed by a women's committee that was answerable to the Home Mission.

The aim of this new group was:

(a) to unite the women and girls of the Church in prayer, fellowship and service for women's work at home;

(b) to take over and extend the work hitherto done by the Deaconess Guild and to raise funds to enable congregations to secure the services of Deaconesses and women Home Mission workers as required;

(c) to undertake such other work among women and girls as may be deemed desirable in consultation with the Home Mission Convener.<sup>159</sup>

In order to achieve these goals, a new organizational structure, one which largely mirrored that of the Women's Missionary Association (WMA), was adopted. The WHM was to be managed by an executive committee, drawn from a general committee, which was itself to be composed of representatives of the various branches, based in local congregations. These branches were to be responsible for co-ordinating the fundraising efforts in their own area and forwarding the proceeds to the WHM office. These donations, together with an annual grant from the Home Mission (£350 in 1944), were to be placed into a WHM Fund and used to pay for the training and salaries of deaconesses. This system was very effective. In its first year, the WHM raised £593 through donations and subscriptions, more than six times the turnover of the DGC in its final days. As its branch network expanded, so did its income. This allowed the WHM to not only increase deaconesses' salaries, but to introduce a sliding scale, with annual increments based on years of service. In 1944 a deaconess' starting salary was £150, rising to £165 and £175 in her second and third years of service. Within two years this scale had been increased to £170-£200 and by 1963 it had been raised to £450-£650.

This more professional approach to salaries was complemented by a revised approach to the management of candidates and working deaconesses. For the first time, terms and conditions were printed and a set of by-laws governing the deaconess position was developed. Thus, candidates were expected to have a secondary education and be between the ages of 20 and 30. They were required to answer a set of questions posed by the Executive Committee and provide two references. They had to be members in full communion within the Irish Presbyterian Church and be recommended by their minister. Most importantly, they had to demonstrate 'a Christian character and personality founded on personal allegiance to Jesus Christ, and a desire to serve Him



in the work of the Church at home. Adequate knowledge of the Bible, some experience in Christian work, tact, and a sympathetic understanding of the needs of others are essential.<sup>60</sup>

Candidates were now expected to undergo a training programme for which the WHM would pay. Like the WMA, the WHM required its students to attend the missionary training college associated with the Church of Scotland, St. Colm's. While it had started out life as a training centre for foreign missionaries, during the First World War it had developed a diaconal training programme.<sup>61</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, this was a highly innovative and challenging two-year course which attracted students from around the world. Once candidates had finished their training, they would be 'called' by the WHM to a particular congregation and a service of 'dedication', as it was now to be called, would be arranged by the relevant Presbytery. Responsibility for the deaconess's work was now shared: the WHM exercised a general oversight over the deaconesses while the minister and session had the authority to direct their work within the congregation. All of these changes were solidified in 1946 with the decision, in keeping with practice in the Church of Scotland, to replace the term 'deaconess' with 'Church Sister' and to replace the traditional brown uniform with the Scottish grey. In 1952, these amendments were added to the Code.<sup>62</sup> The WHM was now a visible, and official, presence within the Irish Presbyterian Church. Its structural and financial provisions now provided a solid foundation upon which a successful and dynamic organization could be built.

Grow is certainly what the WHM and Church Sisters did in the years that followed. The statistics paint an impressive picture. With the WHM in place and a healthy bank balance on which to draw, the number of 'dedications' of Church Sisters steadily increased from 7 in the 1940s to 16 in the 1950s and 14 in the 1960s. In the 1940s, the number of Church Sisters working for the WHM at any one time rose steadily from 4 to around 10 in the mid-1950s, 13 or 14 in the early 1960s and 18-20 in the late 1960s. At the same time, the average length of a Church Sister's ministry began to increase. While 92 per cent of deaconesses in the period 1909-37 served for less than 10 years, this figure had dropped to 47 per cent for the period 1944-70. Twenty-six per

cent of Church Sisters between 1944-70 had worked for over 30 years. While the average length of a deaconess' ministry had been 4-5 years, it was 16 for a Church Sister. All of this suggests an organization which was strong and healthy, which women felt could be, as the WHM had hoped, a 'permanent career' choice. That said, there were still significant losses of staff to marriage, other service-based professions and, in the 1970s, training for the ministry.

This expansion in woman power allowed the WHM to experiment with the type, style and location of the Church Sister's traditional work. Church Sisters began to move into areas of work which reflected growing concerns about social welfare and the role of the church in local communities. When deaconesses were first appointed in the Presbyterian church, the aim had been to increase the number of trained agents working in inner-city congregations. However, in the post-war years, the real centres of population growth and expansion were on the outskirts of the cities and larger towns, with the construction of massive housing estates such as Cregagh and Rathcoole. It was, therefore, unsurprising to find that Church Sisters were increasingly being placed, not in established congregations, but in 'church extension' charges. Miss E.L. Frank was the first Church Sister to be assigned in this way when in 1948 she was appointed to work in the Cregagh estate. Over the course of the next 16 years, she worked in at least three other housing estates. With no church, no congregation and a very different physical layout, Frank admitted that church extension involved a whole new approach. In 1949 she reported:

When first I entered the Housing Trust Estate [at Cregagh] I wondered how I should ever find my way about; every street looks the same, with its asphalt road and cement pavements. There is not much individuality about the houses, every one of which has the front door painted either orange, and the 'bin-door' beside it green, or else the front door a bright yellow and the 'bin-door' blue. One would almost require a training in Pelmanism to remember the names of the streets, such as 'Kilbroney Bend' and 'Shimna Close'. However, by making my own map of the district, I can now find my way about quite easily.<sup>63</sup>

Church Sisters involved in church extension work frequently mentioned the rapid



turnover of population and the constant need for door-to-door visitation. The lack of a church building, and of an established congregational 'family', meant that the Church Sister often worked in isolation and with little backup. Nevertheless, it was an area in which increasing numbers of them came to specialize.

Church Sisters also began to experiment with alternative means of reaching the people in their communities. Throughout the 1960s, the WHM sought to make the church more relevant and to demonstrate its concern, not just for their souls, but for their social welfare. Church Sisters had become increasingly conscious that conventional churches would never be attractive and that the social obstacles to church attendance were simply too great to be overcome. In particular, Nesta McAlister, who had been working in Oldpark, felt the need for a church which operated within the community, which could function as an informal setting in which the love of Christ could be demonstrated. In 1966, she scraped the rent together on a small two-up, two-down kitchen terrace in North Belfast. Its purpose was 'to bring the Church to the people in an informal way' by operating as a kind of community centre. Known as the North Belfast Friendship House, similar premises were secured in East and South Belfast in 1972 and 1976. For Helen Watson, the East Belfast Home was meant to act as 'a bridge to Christ' and to enable people to 'see the love and concern of Jesus Christ and feel drawn to him.' In doing this she conducted playgroups, primary school clubs, pensioner meetings and young mother's groups.

In its concern to alleviate social problems, the WHM also expanded its activities into two areas which were largely run by women who were not Church Sisters. In 1944 the WHM introduced, under the direction of Ethel Fleming, the position of 'honorary hospital visitor'. Initially intended to provide support in Belfast's hospitals and nursing homes for Presbyterian women patients who were from the country and had few visitors, it soon spread to include Presbyterian patients in general and became a substantial area of work for lay women. By the 1960s, teams of women operated in hospitals across Northern Ireland. In the 1950s, the WHM began to take an interest in the Presbyterian families who were appearing before Belfast's divorce and child custody courts. The object was to provide these couples with advice and guidance and

promote reconciliation. This work was soon taken over by Bessie McConachie, a social worker and later MP for Queen's University. Under her leadership, it expanded into a permanent Home Advice Centre, with premises on North Queen Street, that provided a full range of counselling and casework services.

By the mid-1960s, the size and scale of the WHM's operations had dramatically increased and more Church Sisters were serving the church than ever before. Church Sisters continued to serve in urban congregations, but the WHM had moved strongly into new areas of need, and had expanded their personnel to include social workers and female volunteers. However, it was time to re-evaluate. In 1965, in order to allow Irish Church Sisters to become members of international diaconal networks, the General Assembly agreed to change their name back to 'deaconess'. At the same time, the WHM sought to clarify the deaconess' role within the church. In a further amendment, the WHM stated that a deaconess was 'one who has, under a call from God, pledged herself to the service of Jesus Christ and His Church, and has been approved, trained and commissioned thereto in conformity with the doctrine and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.' In their annual



reports, the Church Sisters repeatedly affirm their sense of calling to a life of service. As Jean McClure stated in 1961, 'It is a privilege to have been welcomed into so many homes, to have met and talked with many patients in hospitals and to have rejoiced with them in their recovery to health and strength.'<sup>65</sup> Or, as Jane Orr stated in 1966, 'It is always a joy to share in the many activities of a large congregation. I am proud of the privilege to be welcomed into so many homes in the course of visitation and to



have shared their joys and sorrows.<sup>66</sup> For these women, their sense of usefulness and purpose came from their calling to service.

## The Presbyterian Women's Association, 1971-2008

The history of deaconesses in the Irish Presbyterian Church in the late twentieth century must be placed against the backdrop of changing attitudes towards the role of women in both public and church life. Thus, no discussion of Irish deaconesses in the years after 1971 can take place without a recognition of the impact of the women's



liberation movement on attitudes towards women in public life, in particular on their right to work. This wider shift in cultural values was, no doubt, a crucial determinant in the decision taken by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to ordain women to the ministry in 1973. The right of Presbyterian women to seek ordination presented the deaconess movement with both opportunities and problems. If the female diaconate was, as some commentators have suggested, only transitional, in that it provided women with limited leadership opportunities until full leadership roles became available, then the

opening up of the ordained ministry to women should have signalled its decline. However, the deaconess movement has continued to thrive, and if anything, has become more popular.

The continuing popularity of the deaconess position may be partially explained by the general reluctance of evangelical women to take on leadership roles within the church, despite the presence of rules and regulations which allow it. In a survey of evangelical attitudes towards women in late twentieth-century Belfast, Sandra Baillie found that while roughly 50 per cent of the evangelical women in her sample approved or strongly

approved of women ministers and preachers, only 4.9 per cent were involved in any leadership roles themselves, and this included the positions of elder and treasurer, as well as the ordained ministry.<sup>67</sup> The diaconal role, therefore, would appear to have reflected more closely the more limited spiritual aspirations of Presbyterian women in the late twentieth century. However, the diaconal role has also been attractive to women for strongly practical reasons. From the 1980s onward, it was a role which could allow women to combine both work and family responsibilities, as will be discussed in more detail below. It was also a position which women could enter at almost any stage in life. Over the course of the twentieth century, for example, women entered the diaconate as young students or as women with only a few years' experience as shop clerks or office workers. Others had had entire careers in other areas of work, such as in foreign missions, nursing or business. Still others had been housewives who were looking to return to the workforce now that their children were grown. The position of deaconess, therefore, provided Presbyterian women with a potential career prospect that did not discriminate on the basis of age or experience. This 'open' admissions policy allowed the deaconess movement to draw on a much wider pool of candidates than it might otherwise have done, and in doing so ensured its continued survival.

The ongoing viability of the diaconal role may also be explained by the trend within the wider Irish Presbyterian Church towards a more team-based approach to ministry. In the 1980s and 1990s the Church began to stress the need for all of its members to engage in 'ministry' and 'service' in the widest possible sense. Large congregations, for example, began to take on a range of trained specialists, such as youth ministers and directors of worship, to train and lead members in various outreach and service-based initiatives. As trained professionals in the area of pastoral work, deaconesses fit easily into this team-based 'model' and increasingly occupied a training, or enabling, role within the congregation. Their role within the modern congregation has, therefore, continued to be a relevant one.

In the late 1960s the management of deaconesses once again underwent a major restructuring. In 1969 the PCI decided to reorganize the Missions of the Church into



two boards: Home and Overseas. As part of this review, it was suggested that there was substantial overlap and duplication of effort among the various Presbyterian women's groups and that the work of the Presbyterian Women's Union, the Women's Missionary Association and the Women's Home Mission should be amalgamated. The WMA and WHM had already been holding joint sessions and discussing new ways of working more closely together, so their memberships were generally in favour of the change. This restructuring came into effect in 1971 with the creation of the Presbyterian Women's Association (PWA). Given that the PWA now had responsibility for both deaconesses and foreign missionaries, and was therefore responsible to both the Home and Overseas Boards, it was decided to structure the PWA Executive to reflect these twin concerns. The offices of PWA (Home) and PWA (Overseas) were created, each with a Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. These officers, along with a selection of the general membership, represented PWA concerns on their respective Board. For the first time, women were officially represented on the Boards of the Church.

The revised PWA looked very much like its predecessors: it had branches in every congregation, who sent representatives to a general committee, who, in turn, elected an executive committee. Its purpose was necessarily broad. It aimed to:

- a) unite the women of the Church in the dedication of their lives to Jesus Christ and His service in the home, the community and the Church
- b) share in the mission of the Church at home and overseas through thought, prayer, and financial support, and
- c) provide a link with the women of other Churches in Ireland and throughout the world.<sup>68</sup>

These aims were reflected in PWA activity. Fundraising and providing a support network for Presbyterian women was their stock in trade. Women's Work, the quarterly magazine of the WMA which had promoted the work of female foreign missionaries since 1887, was broadened to include home news and articles for general edification. In 1988 it changed its name to Wider World to reflect this widening sphere of interest.

Its finances were generally secure, except for a small crisis in 1982-3 which prompted the creation of a 'Forward Fund' to cover expenses during the summer months, when branch donations were not as frequent.

For deaconesses, these structural changes had little immediate impact on their daily life and work. They continued to be managed by a women's committee which was answerable to a Mission Board. However, the PWA's representation on the Home Board brought deaconesses into closer contact with the decision-making centres of the Church. The Deaconess Association, the professional body which had represented Irish Presbyterian deaconesses since 1944 was given representation on the Home Board and in 1969 had been invited to send representatives to the General Assembly. It therefore began to play a more significant role in driving change within the organization. This new visibility meant that over the next thirty years the role of deaconess came under intense scrutiny and became the object of significant reform. This process can be seen most clearly in three main areas: the modernization of deaconess terms and conditions; the emergence of married deaconesses; and, an ongoing evaluation of the status of deaconesses within the courts of the Church.

In the early 1970s, the office and work of a deaconess was defined by a set of documents which had been drafted in the 1940s and, since then, had been largely unchanged. The original constitution of the WHM from 1945 gathered together custom and practice from the days of the Deaconess Guild and incorporated them into a clear statement of the rules and requirements of the position. These, along with a number of amendments introduced in 1952, formed the basis for the rules governing Church Sisters in the Code of 1962.<sup>69</sup> The decision to return to the name 'deaconess' in 1965 prompted a few significant revisions, but it was not until 1977 when, upon the request of the Deaconess Association, a substantial overhaul of these terms and conditions was carried out. Smaller reviews were conducted in 1990-95 and 1999-2000. A final review in 2006 has brought the management of deaconesses into line with modern employment practices.<sup>70</sup>

The changes which have taken place in diaconal management since the 1970s are a reflection of the changing circumstances in which deaconesses, and the Church have



found themselves. In the 1970s, for example, the basic definition of a deaconess and the nature of her work was amended. Thus, to the original requirement to be called by God and to be pledged to Christ's service was added:

The work of a deaconess is to exercise a ministry, complementary to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, in the spheres of pastoral counselling, education, social work, outreach, etc. The Deaconess may also have some share in the leadership of worship. Her appointment may be to work in congregations, to special work under the auspices of a Board of the Church or to some institution or area of outreach approved by the courts of the Church.<sup>71</sup>

This statement, clearly brought about by the ordination of women in 1973, reflected the perceived need to restate the supportive and pastoral role of deaconesses as one distinct from the ordained ministry. This new addition, however, rather than restricting deaconesses to pastoral spheres, in fact gave them the opportunity, if they so wished, to take up more substantive leadership roles. In the years thereafter, then, it is



unsurprising to see a few deaconesses, at least, referring to their assistance in, or even leadership of, Sunday worship.

The changes in diaconal training have also reflected the closer relationship which deaconesses have had with the Church since the 1970s.

In the late 1970s, St Colm's diaconal training programme

was called into question because, while valued, it did not make 'adequate provision for the Biblical training' which so many candidates required. Little action was taken until 1990, when two Presbyteries memorialized the General Assembly and called on the PWA to investigate their training model. Finally, after substantial consultation and

review, it was recommended in 1996 that candidates with qualifications from Union Theological College, Belfast Bible College or Glasgow Bible College be considered to have met the entrance requirements. In 2000, after yet another extensive review, a sub-committee of the Home Board recommended that Union Theological College (UTC) could provide 'both a comprehensive course of study and the flexibility of training' that was required. From that date, deaconess candidates have been required to attend a two-year course at UTC.<sup>72</sup> It is difficult not to think that this push towards home-grown training was not only the result of concerns about sufficient theological teaching, but also of its content and emphasis. The liberal environment of St Colm's and the Church of Scotland did not sit easily within Irish Presbyterianism's overwhelmingly evangelical ethos.

Other aspects of the diaconal position were modernized and updated, or added for the first time. While some of this is no doubt a reflection of changing employment practices, it is certainly possible to see the work of the Deaconess Association in addressing basic deaconess grievances. Therefore, from the 1970s, deaconesses were eligible to apply for a transfer after three years of service, if they so desired. A service of 'installation', as distinct from the service of commissioning, was implemented as a way to introduce deaconesses to their new charge. Guidelines on the payment of expenses, a real source of grievance for deaconesses, were finally introduced in 1977 when they were set at a percentage of the ministerial amount. Similar provision was made for salaries, which were set first in 1979 at 70 per cent and then in 1980 at 75 per cent of the ministerial minimum. In 1994 a remuneration review group set their salary at 14-17/40ths of the ordained assistants' scale before revising it again in 1999.

The most striking development in the management of Irish deaconesses has been the growing emphasis on the Church's responsibility towards its 'employees'. Thus, in 2006, terms and conditions for deaconesses, for the first time, included a commitment by the Presbyterian Church to their pastoral care. Deaconesses were expected to take part in annual reviews of performance with the BMI/PWA Personnel Committee and to avail of opportunities for personal development, such as in-service training and



sabbatical leave. In-depth reviews would be conducted after three and six years of service.<sup>73</sup> These conditions, combined with the full complement of sick leave, maternity and grievance policies, indicate a modern approach to line management within the Church and the recognition of the need to support staff in the conduct of their roles.

The changes in the terms and conditions of the diaconal position affected a group of women whose number remained relatively constant throughout the period. Between 1972 and 2007, 54 women were commissioned as deaconesses into the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. If the 19 women who were ordained prior to this date, but continued to serve during this period, are included, then the figure rises to 73. Throughout this period there have been, on average, approximately 23 women in service in any given year. This figure has grown from the low twenties in the early 1970s to settle at around 26 or 27 in the late 1980s before declining once again to the current figure of 25.

Statistical indicators suggest that deaconesses are serving for longer than ever. Of those who, between 1972-2007, ceased to work as deaconesses (n=48), the average length of service was approximately 15.6 years. The proportion of women serving for less than nine years dropped from 43 per cent in 1944-71 to 37.5 per cent. Even more striking, the proportion of women serving between 10 and 19 years rose from 19 per cent in 1944-71 to 33 per cent. The numbers of women serving for longer periods of time remained roughly the same. Of those no longer in service, the vast majority left through retirement, with significant numbers resigning to marry and to enter the ministry. Only one resigned due to ill-health and only three left to take up alternative full-time Christian employment. For more and more women, being a deaconess was finally becoming what its organizers in 1945 had hoped: a 'lifework'.<sup>74</sup>

What this rough survey of the post-1971 deaconess body reveals most dramatically is the changing attitudes within the church towards married women and work. Although it was never stipulated in print, the unwritten expectation was that deaconesses would be single and resign their position upon marriage. Given the number of women who resigned for this reason, it was an expensive policy, in both financial and 'woman-power' terms. It was primarily young women who had just started to work full-time and to show a return on the Church's investment who were most 'vulnerable' to this type of

loss. The WHM tried to tackle this by insisting that deaconesses repay a proportion of their training fee if they resigned within five, later two, years. However, it is difficult to see this as an effective deterrent against the forces of true love! A more effective strategy was introduced by the PWA in 1974 whereby married women could be 'recognised' by the Church as, in essence, part-time deaconesses. These 'Woman Workers' were required to complete a one year, part-time training course at UTC at a salary to be determined by the PWA Executive.<sup>75</sup> They were assigned to a congregation where they conducted work that

was, to all extents and purposes, indistinguishable from that of a deaconess. This position was never very popular and attracted only a handful of women. By the late 1980s it had already become an anachronism as deaconesses began, for the first time, to continue to work after their marriage.

The first deaconess to retain her position after marriage was Margaret Fox of Corvally, Co. Monaghan. She was commissioned to Dungannon in 1972, became Margaret Pringle sometime in 1974/5 and moved back to Monaghan where she worked in the Monaghan Presbytery on a part-time basis until her resignation in September 1976. She did not work for long, but it was the start of a growing trend. Pringle no doubt resigned when she had children, but other women, like Heather McCracken (nee McKee) and Christine Lemon (nee Kyle), both ordained in the mid-1980s, continued to work on a part-time basis after their children were born. Other women who had resigned in the 1960s and 1970s, like Jennifer Robinson (nee Bryan) and Lynda Gibson (nee Clarke) returned to full-time work several decades later, no doubt when their children had grown. By the mid 1990s the PWA began to accept married women as candidates. Mrs Ruth Henry and Mrs Elizabeth Matthews, both former Woman Workers, were commissioned as deaconesses in 1991 and 1994 respectively. Mrs Jackie O'Neill was accepted for training in 1996 and was commissioned in 1998. Of





the 23 deaconesses who were married in the period 1972-2007, only four resigned and never returned to diaconal work.

The social stigma attached to married women's work in the mid-twentieth century had clearly prevented the deaconess movement from tapping into a valuable resource. Once that obstacle had been removed, the way was opened for women, regardless of marital status, to engage in a ministry to which they felt called. This change in attitude was for several women a blessed opportunity. When Jenny Robinson returned to full-time deaconess work in 2000 she wrote, 'In 1973 I was completely focused on my training and becoming a deaconess. Twenty years and more have now come and gone, yet I find my vision for the diaconate ministry still as clear today as it was then.'<sup>76</sup> For many women, then, becoming a deaconess in an era of women's liberation and female ordination remained an attractive prospect. It was flexible and could be fit round other responsibilities. It was a service-based role, yet required initiative, leadership skills and the ability to work on one's own.

One of the striking features of the annual reports deaconesses made to the PWA is the frequency with which they claim that 'nothing has changed', 'my work continues unchanged' or 'all continues much unchanged'. This sense of continuity of service permeates the perception that deaconesses had of their work in the late twentieth century. As Frances Wright reflected in 1973, 'The essential part of deaconess work always goes on - keeping in contact with people through home and hospital visiting; Christian education in the widest sense, working with children and young people; and sharing in the worship, work and witness of the congregation as a whole.'<sup>77</sup> In 2005 Heather McCracken echoed Wright's summary of activities in her own work when she wrote, 'My main work continues to be pastoral visitation, listening in the community, helping with Sunday services, caring for our young teens, building Bible knowledge and fellowship, working extensively with primary school children in the summer and working with older people in the community.'<sup>78</sup>

Of course, there were aspects of the work which had changed to suit changed circumstances. The development of specialized ministries, like church extension, continued with the decision in 1973 to commission deaconesses to hospital work. The

Honorary Visitors scheme initiated in the 1940s appears to have been wound down as a result of the Troubles.<sup>79</sup> By 2001 deaconesses were represented in five of Belfast's hospitals. Here they visited patients, conducted prayer meetings and held Sunday services. While some ministries were forced to close, like the Home Advice Centre and the North Belfast Friendship House, others sprang up in their place. Thus, in the 1980s, Carole Cathcart was involved in Hope House, an outreach of Duncairn and St Enoch's, Lynda Gibson was overseeing the development of the Vine Centre in North Belfast and Ruth Petticrew was managing the transformation of Townsend Street into an outreach centre. Each of these ministries combined social welfare and personal evangelism through their cafes, advice clinics, lunch clubs and nearly-new shops.

Given the location of the congregations in which deaconesses served, it is unsurprising that in the 1970s their reports repeatedly refer to the impact of the Troubles on their work. Although they struggle to remain cheerful and declare that church attendance and related activities have not been affected, it is clear that the violence and unrest had a hugely disruptive influence on their work in their communities. Winifred Shaw in Richview remarked, 'During the past year many moved away from our district, some have moved to other houses in the area, exercising





squatter's rights and hoping to receive the tenancy eventually; some are still living in the middle of a 'battle field' because of the difficulty of rehousing at this time.' Nesta McAlister noted that 'our own Young Wives' Group have nearly all moved out of the immediate area now. They still continue though to work and worship through the fellowship here.' Lily Hogg (East Belfast Friendship House) expressed a real bitterness in recounting the story of a poor family of mixed faith, forced to abandon their move into a larger home because of sectarian hostility. 'Sometimes,' she wrote in 1984, 'I have to ask myself what is it all about; what impact are we making on the community? ... Will the love we try to engender ever penetrate this community? Why are we, the Church, failing in our responsibility as salt and light? Are we making Christ's second and great commandment crystal clear to the community: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"? Are we obeying this commandment or are we, too, still asking the question, "And who is my neighbour?"'<sup>80</sup> Such expressions of frustration show deaconesses at their best: deeply engaged with people and with their concerns in a true show of Christian service.

What is most significant about the work of deaconesses in the late twentieth century is the emerging perception of themselves as part of a ministerial team, with shared responsibilities for congregational leadership. This change is seen most clearly in the deaconesses' annual reports to the PWA. In the 1970s and 1980s, deaconesses clearly saw their work as separate to that conducted by the minister and his session. Deaconesses spoke fondly of the help and assistance that they received from their minister and his wife, but they did not speak in terms of inclusion or sharing. In the 1980s, this began to change. Deaconesses began to speak in terms of their 'diaconal ministry', of their 'leadership' roles within the church and their sense of being part of a ministerial 'team'. Thus, Jenny Clegg (Ballycrochan) saw her work as being 'part of a team ministry with Rev. Doug Bradley and the elders'. This role involved her 'being used to fill gaps where there is a shortage of the right leaders' and 'to train others and help them find their way'.<sup>81</sup> Sybil Hogg and Heather McCracken referred to their participation in Sunday services and Carole O'Hara even stated, 'Sometimes I have taken the whole service.'<sup>82</sup> Deaconesses did, indeed, have a wide variety of responsibilities. They cared for congregations during ministerial vacancies, they

supervised building projects and they trained and organized congregational members. And it was clear that they enjoyed this more team-based approach. As Evelyn Whyte (First Lisburn) stated, 'It is so good to feel part of a big team moving forward seeking to build God's Kingdom together.'<sup>83</sup>

Deaconesses have long occupied an anomalous role within the structures of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Unlike other reformed denominations, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has no tradition of a male diaconate and deaconesses have sat uneasily somewhere between ruling elders and the general laity in their status within the Church.<sup>84</sup> While deaconesses have always received official sanction for their work through their commissioning service, it is accepted that their verbal affirmation of the Westminster Confession (rather than its signing) does not convey upon them the status of ordination.<sup>85</sup> Efforts to align them with ministerial assistants, licentiates or retired ministers have not been successful. In the late twentieth century, while deaconesses experienced a significant expansion in their role and a general acceptance of their leadership contribution within the Church as a whole, they were unable to convert this goodwill into significant institutional change. Despite substantial reviews of their position in 1977 and 2000-3, deaconesses have been unable to gain full rights within the courts of the Church.<sup>86</sup>

Although women have been eligible to sit on church courts since 1926, deaconesses only started to gain institutional representation in the late 1960s. In 1965 the General Assembly urged congregations to 'consider the appointment of deaconesses as members of committees' and to invite them to attend Kirk Session when 'matters affecting their work are under discussion'.<sup>87</sup> By 1969, these rights had been extended to include the right to 'sit and deliberate' on all church courts but not to vote. The reminder issued to congregations in 2000 about this ruling would suggest that many of them were either excluding, or at least failing to invite, deaconesses to attend committee and session meetings. This right to 'sit and deliberate' sat oddly against the rights of more and more deaconesses, who, by virtue of being appointed as ruling elders in their congregations, were able to vote. In 1976, and again in 1999, the Deaconess Association asked the General Assembly to review their place within the courts of the Church.



The 1977 and 2000-3 reports are both sympathetic to the concerns raised by the deaconesses and cite much evidence which would suggest that integrating them more fully into the courts of the Church would not be out of keeping with biblical precedents and historical tradition. Both suggested a variety of ways in which this could be done. Deaconesses could be ordained as elders, new legislation could be introduced to make deaconesses members of church courts, or the Church could implement a new third 'order', the diaconate, that would include men and women, deaconesses and other pastoral church workers. However, neither committee felt able to endorse any of these proposals. The problem was largely one of timing and convenience; the complexity and interconnectedness of modern ministry seemed to suggest that change for one party could only occur at the expense of others. Thus, granting voting rights only to deaconesses would exclude a growing body of general church workers who, by virtue of their position, could have an equal claim. Concerns about the difficulty of effecting any change featured prominently in the reports; the creation of a third order within the Church would require an act of parliament. However, the reluctance to endorse any change of status would appear to be driven by a general unwillingness on the part of the General Assembly to impose on the authority of the local congregation. To ordain deaconesses as elders 'gives the impression of bringing this in by the "back door" and would be creative of opposition,' said one report. Similarly, to make deaconesses full members of church courts 'could be opposed simply on the grounds that it is being imposed. At grass roots level in the Church there is the strong view of the congregation or Kirk Session "calling".<sup>88</sup> In 2003, and after consultation with Presbyteries, the General Assembly accepted that there should be 'no change' in the status of deaconesses.

## Conclusion

One hundred years ago a group of men and women believed that trained women working full time in urban congregations could improve the Church's ability to reach out to the unchurched, to restore 'lapsed' Presbyterians to church membership and to meet the desperate social needs of the poor. For forty years they struggled to keep this vision from foundering on the rocks of insufficient finance and lack of interest from

within the wider church. It was only when sound financial and organizational structures were laid down in the 1940s that the deaconess movement was enabled to take on more staff and to expand into new areas of service. Many deaconesses soon found themselves spearheading church extension efforts in new post-war housing estates and serving at the forefront of social welfare initiatives which sought to take the Church into the community and make it relevant to people's everyday lives. Since the 1970s changes within the Presbyterian church have served to increase the status of the diaconal role. Thus, as the Church embraced a more team-based approach to ministry, deaconesses were no longer perceived as simply the 'do-ers' of pastoral work within a congregation. They became the pastoral specialists, with special responsibility for leading their congregations in the fulfillment of their duty of service. The ordination of women, and more general changes in the Church's perception of women's religious roles, has served to make female leadership more acceptable within the church. This has given deaconesses, many of whom do not desire the responsibility of the ordained ministry, the opportunity to exercise a degree of leadership of their own choosing. This freedom of choice – to combine work and family, to start work at almost any age, to exercise leadership if desired – has transformed the modern diaconate into a vibrant and vital expression of women's desire to serve God.

At present deaconesses in the Irish Presbyterian Church are about to undergo yet another change of management. In 2008 the PWA will be renamed 'Presbyterian Women' and will focus on supporting Presbyterian women and enabling them to reach others for Christ. At the same time, responsibility for the deaconesses will move to the Board of Mission in Ireland. In the 1920s, the Rev. D.A. Taylor and his supporters on the Deaconess Guild Council repeatedly expressed the hope that one day deaconesses would come to take a position in the Church which their efforts in service so richly deserved. One hundred years later, and his hope has been fulfilled.